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ABSTRACT

This paper offers critical reflections on parenting education in its social context. The paper is informed by a feminist perspective, and by a structural approach to practice that emphasizes the importance of changing social structures. An introductory section explores the impact of the ideologies of the traditional family, and of motherhood and fatherhood, on society; the role of professional experts in fostering traditional beliefs; and the relationship of parenting education programs to traditional parenting ideologies. An earlier survey of parenting education programs in the Melbourne (Victoria), Australia are revealed that most programs were based on humanistic theories; did not follow a structural approach; and served mostly women. A case study exploring issues emerging from the earlier survey was undertaken. Ten parents participating in a parenting education program in Melbourne were interviewed. The study indicated that even though some breakdown of traditional attitudes was apparent, labor in child rearing was clearly divided according to gender. It is suggested that by not acknowledging that mothering makes up the bulk of the work of child rearing, the program masked the pressures felt by mothers in child rearing. A list of 23 references is provided. (BC)

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PARENTING EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA: A STRUCTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Paper Presented At The Fifth Early Childhood Convention
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INTRODUCTION

> *The first child wasn't what I call a book-baby - she did everything the complete opposite and I found the book actually, to be really negative for me .. it made me feel a total failure then - then I tried to make my child the book baby and she wasn't - I look back now and I should have ditched the book and put it on the compost - and gone ahead, perhaps follow her (the child) more... (35 year old mother)*
>
> *At the moment, or the last couple of years, I've probably been very bad in respect to not being an effective parent ... I think I've been sort of neglecting the kids time-wise ... It's silly - I think work has played such a big part for so many years that if I'm not working on Saturday and doing something constructive on Sunday, I have a guilt complex. (33 year old father)*
>
> *You don't have needs as a parent. They don't exist - at this stage. (31 year old mother)*

These are the voices of some of the women and men who shared their experiences with me as part of the research I am currently undertaking in Melbourne on parenting education. The purpose of this paper is to discuss some aspects of the research.

The paper's central concern is to critically reflect on parenting education in its broader social structural context. The paper is informed by both a feminist perspective and a structural approach to practice, the latter emphasising the importance of endeavouring to change social structures where existing ones limit human functioning (Goldberg Wood and Middleman, 1989:28). These structures include dominant ideologies, which for the purposes of this paper are regarded as perspectives on life which favour the interests of certain groups, influencing people's thinking and behaviour and creating and maintaining standards of behaviour in groups who have been persuaded of their validity (Sargent, 1983:21).

In particular, the paper will explore the impact of the ideology of `the family' and its associated ideologies of motherhood and fatherhood, and parenting education's relationship to these. It will raise some issues emerging out of a survey conducted in the first stage of my research and will then consider some initial impressions from a case study of a small group of parents who took part in a parenting education program. Discussion of the implications will conclude the paper.

'THE FAMILY', MOTHERHOOD AND FATHERHOOD

The nuclear family consisting of male breadwinner, home-based wife and dependent children was the most prevalent family form in the immediate post-war period in Australia. It is now only one of a great diversity of family and household forms, a significant contribution to this development being the changes in the social role of women who increasingly are moving into the paid workforce (McDonald, 1988:44; Kilmartin, 1990:58).

It would seem however, that the image of the nuclear family lives on as a powerful ideology of family life, an image to which many people still aspire. A key feature of this particular family form is its gendered division of labour. The modern nuclear family is also child-centred (Gilding, 1991:94), specialising in socialising and rearing children, and it has developed a distinct pattern of emotional intensity, privacy and family autonomy (Poster, 1978; Reiger, 1985; Shorter, 1975; Stone, 1979).

Couched within this particular image of family life is a notion of motherhood that stresses the responsibility of the biological mother for the rearing of her own children, especially during their early years. This notion or ideology of what is a `good' mother exists across all social groups and ensures that mothers take the major responsibility for caring for children. Drawing on her Australian study of women in working- and middle-class suburbs, Betsy Wearing suggests that the core beliefs of the ideology include that motherhood and womanhood are intermeshed; that mothers should always be available to their children and that they should put their children's needs before their own. Motherhood therefore involves complete responsibility for one's own children and even though it is seen to be a low-status job, its intrinsic rewards outweigh the lack of financial and social recognition (1984:72).

In contrast, "fathers' main parenting responsibilities are considered to be outside the home, working to ensure the financial security and independence of the family group" (Pease and Wilson, 1991:57-8). According to Parke and Sawin (in Pease and Wilson, 1991) this view of fatherhood has assumed that fathers have less interest in nurturing and caring for infants and young children than their mothers and are less competent, with fewer abilities than mothers, for this task.

Whilst there has been some suggestion that men are perhaps becoming more involved in child rearing, there is little evidence that this is happening to any great extent. Kerreen Reiger (1991a:53-5) observes that recent research supports the argument that domestic division of labour remains largely traditional and that the norms of parenting have not changed greatly, with breadwinning and disciplinary responsibility still being very much part of the expectations of being a father, and day-to-day care and affection seen primarily as a mother's responsibility. This is supported by Don Edgar of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, who also reports little shift in the direction of men taking on more family responsibilities (1991:10). Several studies reported on at the Institute's Third Australian Family Research Conference in

November 1989 indicated, to use Lyn Richards' words, `the unexpected power of traditional values [regarding men's and women's roles] over the young and upwardly mobile' (Family Matters, 26, 1990:43).

CRITIQUE OF THE DOMINANT BELIEFS

Since the 1960's sociologists and historians working from within a critical tradition have drawn attention to the inequalities in family life which are masked by the dominant beliefs about the `ideal' family and parenting.

These dominant beliefs increasingly came to be seen as socially and historically determined rather than as some sort of `given', and also oppressive in their endeavour to meet the needs of patriarchy and industrial capitalism with its growing consumer orientation (Gittins, 1985; Morgan, 1985; Poster, 1978; Reiger, 1991b). Attention has been drawn to the ways in which the dominant beliefs have kept women and men shackled to particular views and behaviours, and especially have kept women in a subordinate and disadvantaged position vis-a-vis the majority of men.

Peter Leonard (1984: 165-6) points out that the ideology of motherhood and of male economic responsibility maintains women in domestic labour and subordinate wage labour. He asserts that whilst the actual experience of motherhood can be a satisfying experience, especially because it is socially approved, it represents to the woman a deeply contradictory experience. Because the mother is expected to place the young child's needs first and her own last, she is placed in a subordinate position which, however, is perceived as necessary and even desirable. Leonard claims that this conflict may play an important part in inducing guilt in women. Thorne (1982:12) also highlights the arguments of a number of feminists that excessive guilt can be evoked through the intensive relationship between a mother and her child.

Wearing (1984:11) sees the responsibility for parenting, devolving as it does almost exclusively to mothers, as a major factor in the subordination and oppression of women. I agree with her contention that if the existing ideology is to be challenged, then one of the things that must occur is a change in male perceptions of child care and housework.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERTS AND THE DOMINANT BELIEFS

Writers from within the critical tradition have also drawn attention to the part played by professionals in the adoption and fostering of these dominant beliefs. Reiger has chronicled in detail this phenomenon (1985, 1991a). In the early twentieth century, Australian women were seen as "the controllers of the quantity and quality of the Australian population, a task so important that [they] had to be supervised and regulated in the course of carrying out their `national duty'" (1991a:47). The professional experts of the new middle-class, assisting and in conjunction with the state, took considerable interest in the process of child rearing in what Reiger terms `reform attempts'.

In the 1920's and 30's new specialists in child rearing emerged in the form of infant welfare sisters and paediatricians followed soon after by kindergarten and child guidance professionals and other specialists. More recent developments have included the involvement of professionals and `lay' experts in specialist training in parenting.

Themes that can be found in the messages of the professional experts include an emphasis on mothering and the rationalising and professionalising of motherhood (Reiger, 1991a:48-50). More recently this has involved a shift in the theories of child rearing away from the earlier emphasis on conformity and discipline to a more permissive approach to child rearing and an emphasis on personal expressiveness and individualism (Edgar, 1991:16).

With an emphasis on the child-centred family, child rearing was being stressed as a private parental responsibility with parents (mothers) increasingly responsible for the guidance of their children. An emphasis on the individualising and psychologising of problems through the influence of child development theory about the parent-child relationship and the significance of mothering saw an expectation of the mother as manager of the family's emotional wellbeing (Reiger, 1991a:47).

Reiger points out, however, the contradiction to be found in the reform attempts of the professional experts. In reinforcing the traditional construction of `the family', the professionals at the same time were undermining the role of the mother by reducing it to the execution of `rational and scientific' tasks along lines laid down by outside experts (1985:20).

The influence of the professional experts then, in association with other social factors, has meant that parenting, and mothering in particular has become more complicated. As Reiger (1991a) points out, suburban isolation and the breakdown of wider kin and community supports along with the pressures associated with child rearing in a consumer society have all contributed to increasing expectations of parents, particularly mothers and an increased load of child rearing.

PARENTING EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Two important threads therefore emerge from the discussion. On the assumption that it is important to develop more flexible views of mothering and fathering, consideration needs to be given to whether parenting education operates to reinforce traditional views of parenting or to support changes to these views. In addition, if we are to ensure that parenting education is supportive to parents rather than undermining, we need to know more about parents' responses to parenting programs. The focus of this paper is primarily on the first point.

With these issues in mind, I undertook a survey of formal parenting education programs run in groups in and around Melbourne to obtain a general profile of parenting education. Results of the survey have been reported on elsewhere (Allan, 1989) and will not be provided in detail here. However, some particular issues of significance to this paper will be commented on.

The survey indicated that the theoretical derivations of the most commonly provided parenting programs were humanistic or eclectic, the latter incorporating a range of approaches which could be categorised as humanistic, behavioural, psychoanalytic and systems. These approaches can be characterised as fitting primarily within the functionalist school of thought. This emphasizes the order and stability of society which is deemed possible because of the supposed consensus on values throughout society, and is maintained through the socialisation of the majority so that they internalise the generally agreed upon norms and roles. The study of society tends to occur in isolation from historical, political and economic factors and social change is by definition seen to be dysfunctional (Sargent, 1983:80-1).

This contrasts with the critical school of thought from which the structural approach is derived. This school of thought assumes that society is held together by coercion based on the power of dominant groups and consists of people who struggle against each other in an attempt to organise society to serve their own interests and needs. In this approach, social change is seen as inevitable and has to be worked for in order to reverse the power arrangements of the status quo (Sargent, 1983:82).

The survey indicated, not surprisingly, that program participants are most often female, of Anglo-Saxon origin and middle-class. As noted in an earlier paper (Allan, 1989), it would appear that programs still focus on mothers, with fathers getting little attention in their parenting role through these programs.

This picture of the values and assumptions underpinning the programs and of the program participants raises interesting questions about whether the dominant beliefs about parenting are being reinforced (unwittingly or not) in the programs. Parenting programs that are based on a critical theoretical perspective and that also target fathers would, it is suggested, be more likely to cut across the traditional beliefs. There appeared to be few of these programs in the survey I conducted. The suggestion does raise a dilemma, however. If programs are directed to mothers, they may run the risk of merely reinforcing the stereotype. If they are targetted at fathers, there is the danger that they may be gender-neutral.

A case study was undertaken to explore in greater depth some of the issues emerging from the survey. Because of the frequency of use of the STEP program, I selected a group of ten parents who chose to do a STEP course which was conducted at a local kindergarten in a middle-class suburb of Melbourne.

The STEP program which is based on humanistic principles was developed in the USA in the 1970's to help parents relate more effectively to their children. It emphasises mutual respect between parent and child, cooperation, responsibility and self-reliance (Dinkmeyer and McKay, 1982). The program is divided into weekly topics with detailed instructions for facilitators, and these were followed fairly closely from week to week in the course run at the kindergarten.

I joined the group in an observer role during the sessions and did indepth interviews with the group facilitators, the parent participants and their non-participant partners.

The information about to be presented will focus on some general impressions to date that are of interest here. These concern the mothers' and fathers' experience of parenting, and structural context issues - in particular the significance of gender-neutral assumptions and the philosophies of family autonomy and the `psychologising' or individualising of parents' concerns. Because of the use of the case study method it is not possible to generalise from the experiences of this group of parents, but issues for further speculation and consideration are raised.

Experiences of parenting

Overall, the experience of the women and men in the case study fits with the research findings outlined earlier in the paper that little change can be seen in the patterns of child rearing. A fairly clear gendered division of labour existed for the parents, but some breakdown of traditional attitudes was apparent.

All men were the primary breadwinners, and whilst four mothers were full-time homemakers, the other three women worked in part-time paid jobs that mostly fitted with school hours or times when the father would be home from work (for example, evenings or weekends). Because of these work patterns, the fathers spent far less time than the mothers with their children.

On the other hand some men had definite responsibilities for child care tasks that they shared in an interchangeable way with their partners, albeit within the constraints of their full-time jobs. There was also an awareness amongst some men of the need to spend more time with their children as seen, for example, in the quote at the beginning of this paper. It is encouraging to see fathers as well as mothers attending parenting classes, suggesting an attitude that parenting is shared responsibility.

Wearing's study (1984) on the ideology of motherhood shows that whilst some respondents were questioning or even overthrowing traditional beliefs about a `good' mother, most had internalised the ideas. In terms of their work patterns and apparent acceptance of the division of labour involved, it would seem that parents in this study have internalised some of the dominant ideas, yet one of the themes in group discussions was the struggle of some mothers against the social

pressures created by the stereotype of being a `good' mother. However, contradictions are also evident, as group members also struggled with the discomfort created if a parent was not seen by others to be a `good' parent.

Structural Context Issues

The STEP program does not differentiate between mothering and fathering and the parents in the study tended not to differentiate either the expectations or actual tasks of mothers or fathers, despite the division of labour in their day-to-day lives. Thus gender-neutral language is problematic. Backett (in Morgan, 1985:200-2) notes the importance of gender differences within parenthood and the problems associated with the use of the terms `parent' and `parenting'. She urges us to go beyond the gender-neutral mask by treating motherhood and fatherhood separately, noting the apparent discrepancy between approximately egalitarian assumptions and the reality of the sexual division of labour within the home and between home and work.

It is suggested that by not acknowledging that mothering is the bulk of the work of child rearing nor allowing for much discussion of this issue, the program in this study masked the reality of the workload and the pressures felt by the mothers and fathers, but especially the mothers.

Whilst there was ample opportunity in the program for parents to discuss problems and pressures they were experiencing, there was limited acknowledgement of the part played by structural factors as external determinants of the situations experienced.

Factors that seem to have contributed to this include the continuing influence of the principle of family autonomy and privacy, and of the tendency towards `psychologising' or individualising of problems.

Parents seemed to have a strong belief that parenting is a private responsibility and all demonstrated a strong sense of resposibility towards their children, not least through participation in the STEP program. This sense of responsibility is acknowledged as being both desirable and necessary (for example see Edgar, 1988:1-7). However, Edgar (1988) draws our attention to `the myth of personal and family self-sufficiency'. He argues that families, because they are not insulated from outside social pressures, are a public as well as a private matter and that support for their wellbeing should be shared, not left to private means alone.

With the focus in the STEP program on approaches to child rearing, techniques for communication and management of children's behaviour, it is not surprising that problems and issues raised by parents were defined and `solved' in individualised ways. Ideas for dealing with issues usually located the responsibility for the problem directly within the individual's or family's control thus reinforcing family autonomy and privacy. Again our attention is drawn to the need to consider the possible links between day-to-day management problems and the broader structural context such as the relative isolation of families, and the actual load of child rearing with its intense emotional relationships, its limited social support and its plethora of advice from the experts.

WAYS FORWARD

The need to challenge the dominant beliefs about mothering and fathering has already been established and it seems that parenting education programs may be in a good position to do this. The paper has been focussing to date on some of the limitations in the STEP program but the case study showed that parents also expressed some satisfaction with approaches and skills that they learnt in the program. It is essential therefore to recognise the danger of simply replacing one set of ideologies with another.

In this final section I will give some concrete ideas on what an alternative approach might look like. The model of self-directed groupwork identified by Mullender and Ward (1985) seems to have much to offer as a way of overcoming the various concerns. This form of groupwork is based on a social structural view of the causes of day-to-day problems and is aimed primarily at achieving external change rather than on changing the attitudes or behaviour of group members themselves. It acknowledges that the various social networks and institutions of which we are all members in part help to create our attitudes, hopes and choices and that "intervention which does not take these into account becomes detached from the reality of people's lives and also misses an important area for achieving change" (Mullender and Ward, 1985:156). Emphasis is on starting with people's own life experiences and it is assumed that members lack power of some sort rather than skills or desirable personal qualities. Members are encouraged to question others' attitudes towards themselves, to be actively involved in decision-making and to challenge the prejudicial aspects of societal norms.

In this model, a redefinition of the notion of worker expertise occurs so that it becomes seen as the capacity to engage professionals and group members together in exchanging and generating the knowledge and skills to meet the issues of concern. Facilitators of such groups are required to be clear about their own values and to share these with the group. It is also essential that facilitators have the skills of critical questioning to enable group members to move from a personal to a structural change perspective. Through the questions `what?', `why?' and `how' the facilitator can move the group along: `what' allows and helps the group to identify the issues in the group; `why' helps the group to explore why those issues exist; and `how' helps members to decide what actions they want to take.

By way of example, a hassle identified by most of the parents - both mothers and fathers - was that of not having enough time to meet their own needs and interests or those of their children. In the program I observed, suggested resolutions of this issue centred on individual skills and competencies, such as the use of `I'-messages.

Drawing on the self-directed model, an alternative approach to this issue of `not enough time' would be to firstly acknowledge that this was an issue of concern to many in the group. The facilitator would then help the group to look at why there is not enough time. Critical questioning used at the group's pace will encourage parents to gradually make links between their own experiences and the external demands and expectations placed on them by society - for example, `what sort of time do you need?', `what other things are you doing with your time?', `what might stop you from having more time?' and `who says you need to spend time on these activities?'. These sorts of questions pave the way for parents to look more broadly and take into account factors such as stereotyped and unhelpful attitudes and beliefs,lack of child care, work-places unsympathetic to child rearing, inflexible shopping hours and so on. At the very least, this sort of orientation may help parents to move away from seeing the issue of `not enough time' as one to which they must adapt and which will only be solved by individual skills and competencies.

In conclusion, parenting programs need to make clear their value base and the assumptions underlying the programs must be spelt out. There must be a move from gender-neutral assumptions and language, and the facilitator must be alert to opportunities to help parents make links between their own experiences as mothers and fathers and the social structural context that has helped shape these experiences. Above all, facilitators must have an open mind and be accepting of all family types and patterns of mothering and fathering. The implementation of principles such as these will help towards the easing of the shackles placed on mothers in particular, and fathers, by the dominant beliefs about motherhood and fatherhood.

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